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The Short `a' Pattern of Philadelphia among African-American Speakers

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There is a great deal known about the distribution of lax and tense short a among White Philadelphians, and below are points summarized from Labov (1989).

- It is the most complex feature of the Philadelphia dialect.

- In the Middle Atlantic region of the U.S., there is a two-way opposition of tense and lax short a which this study is concerned with: the difference between lax short a [æ] and the raising and ingliding of tense short a [e:ə].

- The phonetic raising is due to regular sound change. The distribution of tense and lax forms shows lexical and grammatical conditioning.

- The phonological pattern of short a in Philadelphia is unique and uniform across social classes and ethnic groups except for African-Americans.

It is the last point which was the impetus for this study. Does the short a pattern of Philadelphia exclude all of its African-Americans? What about the large, Black middle class community in Philadelphia?[1] From a social standpoint, there are many Blacks in Philadelphia who appear to live their lives fully integrated in every aspect of mainstream Philadelphia life: in schools, neighborhoods, social networks, and work. If the Philadelphia short a pattern is part of the system which defines the Philadelphia speech community, then the pattern among middle class African-Americans should be a determining factor in their membership. Intuitively, it seems that fully integrated members should demonstrate the Philadelphia pattern – like all other ethnic groups in Philadelphia. Therefore, this study is limited to middle class Blacks.

There are 30 speakers, 15 men and 15 women, in 4 different age groups (under 20, 20-40, 40-60 and 60+). The youngest speaker is 8 and the oldest is 81. Only speakers with significant contact with the White community were chosen. The amount of this contact varies by individual. But, generally, all speakers attended predominantly White schools at the college level or in junior high or high school. Many grew up in integrated neighborhoods. Most are either homeowners; or, as in the case of minors, living with parents who are homeowners. A little more than half grew up in nearby Philadelphia suburbs, the other in different neighborhoods of Philadelphia. The speakers range from upper working class to upper middle class.[2] Among their professions are college

[1]The 1990 U.S. Census reports that from an economic standpoint, there is a substantial middle class community among African-Americans in Philadelphia. Over 36,000 Black households in metropolitan Philadelphia have an annual income of $50,000 or more.

[2]The majority of speakers were raised in working class and upper working class homes and entered the middle and upper middle class as a result of educational opportunities that were not available to earlier generations of African-Americans.

administrators, attorneys, managers, skilled laborers, an engineer. One is an original Tuskegee airman. As a whole, they are well educated. Table 1 shows the breakdown of speakers by sex and age and their educational background. These 30 speakers provide over 6,000 tokens to describe the short a pattern among African-Americans in Philadelphia.

Highest Education Completed	20-40		40-60		60+		TOTAL
	F	M	F	M	F	M	
High School Graduate			1	1	1	3	6
Some College		1			1		2
College Graduate	2	2		2	1	1	8
Masters				1			1
JD (attorney)	1	1	1	1			4
Doctorate			1		1		2
Total	**3**	**4**	**3**	**5**	**4**	**4**	**23**

Under 20 Group	F	M	TOTAL
Private Schools	2	1	3
Science/Engineer High	1	1	2
Suburban Public	1	1	2
Total	**4**	**3**	**7**

Table 1: Speakers and their educational background

To elicit formal speech, speakers were asked to read a word list, complete sentences, and perform semantic differentials containing various short a words. This was followed by an interview with the goal of obtaining casual speech containing short a words. There are about 2900 tokens from formal speech and 3300 from casual.

The short a words were impressionistically coded in three categories: tense, lax, and raised. Raising to [ɛ] is a feature of the short a pattern of Blacks, but not Whites. The words were divided into 33 groups based on the environments following short a which are described in Labov (1989).

Table 2 shows the breakdown of tense, lax, and raised percentages by each environment. Following Labov (1989), the words are divided into two core groups ("Normally Tense" and "Normally Lax"), reflecting the normal Philadelphia pattern. The asterisked numbers indicate groups in which there are less than 10 tokens. The categories at the bottom of the table with bullet points are not discussed in this study. The tokens are divided into formal and casual which helps illustrate the effect of style, although the differences here are minimal for most groups. There is significantly more laxing in formal style in *mad/bad/glad*, perhaps reflecting correction in the elicited forms. Under "Other Groups" near the bottom of the page, there is a significant difference in styles in intervocalic /r/ and in flaps. However, for /r/ only one word (*marry*) was elicited in the formal style and in flaps only two different words were elicited.

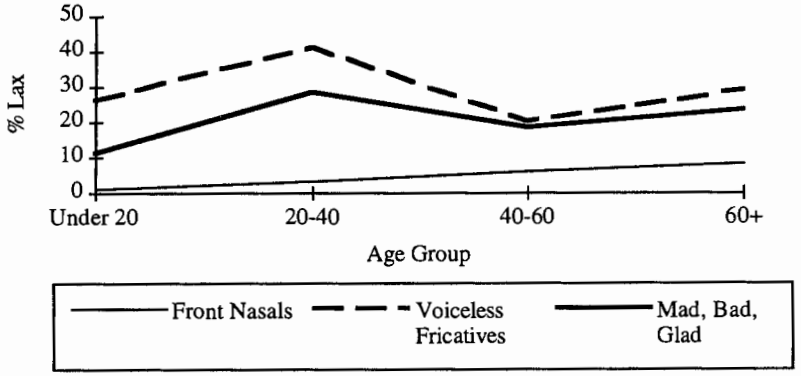
In this study the results in the core groups will be reported by the subgroups. For example, looking at normally tense – the results will be discussed for front nasals, voiceless fricatives, and *mad/bad/glad.*

What is the pattern for these African-Americans? If a word is normally tense – like *pan* – then it is expected that the percentage of lax tokens will be very low. To allow for comparisons with the White Philadelphians in Labov (1989), the figures in this study are reported in the following way. Normally tense categories show the percentage lax tokens and normally lax show the percentage tense. If these Black speakers show the Philadelphia pattern in the core groups, the percentages associated with the categories will be relatively low.

The graphs which follow show the results. The figures combine formal and casual tokens. The results are shown by age group since age was found to be a substantial factor in tensing and laxing. Unless, otherwise noted, the graphs are scaled to a maximum of 50%.

In Figure 1 (Percentage Lax in Normally Tense Environments) the front nasals are consistently low for all groups – with a low of 1% lax for the under twenty to a high of 8% in speakers over 60. However, the other two environments show relatively high percentages of laxing. The highest line represents the voiceless fricatives. In the *mad/bad/glad* category, there is also more laxing than is expected since these words are almost categorically tense in Philadelphia speech. The 20-40 year olds have the highest rate of laxing in this group. Some of these speakers – the majority of whom are women – have very high percentages of laxing in normally tense environments. In fact, four women in the study account for 41% of the lax tokens.

Figure 1: Percentage lax variants in normally tense environments



Next, there is the core group which is normally lax. If the African-American speakers match the Philadelphia pattern of Whites, there should be low percentages of tensing in this group. In Figure 2 (Percentage Tense in Normally Lax Environments), this is true for the oldest group: 60+. In their case the highest percentage tensing is 9%. However, as will be shown in comparison to White Philadelphians, this is still a considerable percentage of tensing. The younger groups, especially those under 20, have percentages of tense tokens as high as 39% (for the velar nasal). In fact, the lowest percentage for under 20 is for

voiceless stops (17%) which is well above the highest percentage for the oldest group. Overall, there is a clear age effect.

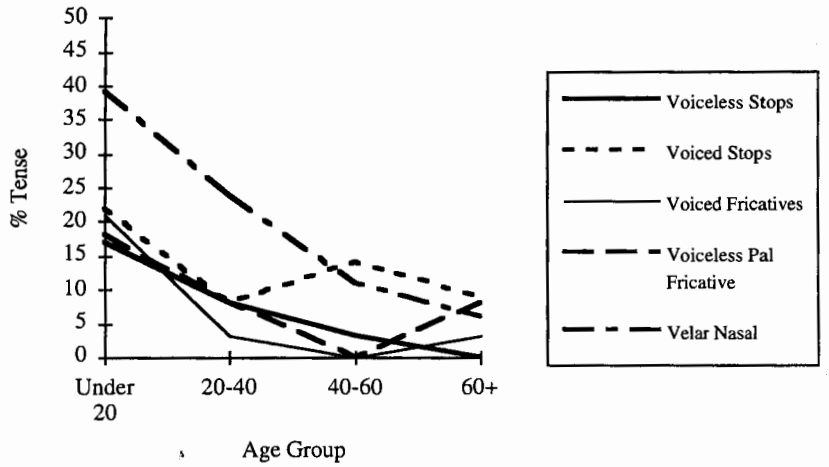
	FORMAL			CASUAL		
Following Environment	**%Lax**	**%Tense**	**%Raised**	**%Lax**	**%Tense**	**%Raised**
Normally Tense						
n (can)	4*	96	0	6*	93	1*
m (ham)	3*	97	0	1*	99	0
n and [-voice] C (dance)	4*	96	0	0	98	2*
n and [+voice] C (hand)	7*	93	0	6*	94	0
C+r_nasal+C (grand)	7*	93	0	5*	95	0
Front Nasals Subtotal	5	95	0	5	95	0
f (half)	29	65	6*	30	69	1*
s (glass)	29	68	3*	28	68	5
θ (bath)	32	67	1*	23	77	0
Voiceless Fricatives Subtotal	30	67	3	27	69	3
mad, bad, glad	26	69	5*	16	83	2*
Total-Normally Tense	17	82	2	16	82	2
Normally Lax						
p (cap)	88	4*	8	84	9	7
t (mat)	86	4*	10	82	7	11
ʧ (snatch)	86	3*	11	85	5*	10
k (back)	90	2*	9	85	8	6
Voiceless Stops Subtotal	87	3	9	85	8	8
b (grab)	86	5*	8*	79	13	8*
d (pad)	78	10	11	72	19	10
ʤ (badge)	87	3*	10*	89	11*	0
g (bag)	89	5*	6*	88	4*	9*
Voiced Stops Subtotal	83	7	9	77	14	9
v (have)	89	6*	5*	91	6*	3*
ð (rather)	93	3*	3*	100	0	0
z (jazz)	0	0	0	78*	11*	11*
Voiced Fricatives Subtotal	90	5*	4*	90	6*	3*
ʃ (cash)	90	7*	3*	92	8*	0
ŋ (hang)	78	21	1*	80	19	2*
Total-Normally Lax	85	7	8	82	10	8

Other Groups

Final l (pal)	98	1*	1*	0	0	0
Intervocalic l (alley)	98	2	0	95	5*	0
l + C (albums)	100*	0	0	100*	0	0
/l/ Subtotal	98	2*	0*	96	4*	0
Intervocalic r (carry)	71	29*	0	50	50	0
Intervocalic Fric. (classical)	0	0	0	91	9	0
Intervocalic m (hammer)	60	40	0	55	45	0
Intervocalic n (banana)	55	45	0	58	40	2*
Flaps (matter)	93	2*	5*	76	15*	9*
•ran, swam, began	0	0	0	29*	71*	0
•s (casual)	0	0	0	67*	33*	0
•Open syllable + f (African)	0	0	0	80*	0	20*

Table 2: Percentage of tense, lax and raised variants by linguistic environment

Figure 2: Percentage tense variants in normally lax environments



In the words in which short a is followed by voiced stops, there is considerable variation in tensing and laxing among different words. For example, *pad* shows 85% lax tokens, while *dad* has only 28% lax. The percentage lax for *sad* – which is a high frequency word in the study – is 69%. The words with following, /b/ (*grab*), and /ʤ/ (*graduate*), and /g/ (*bag*) are more consistently lax. In Figure 3 (Percentage Tense in Normally Lax Environments by Age), words in which short a is followed by /d/ are excluded to show the effect of their high percentages of tensing. The age effect is even clearer here.

Tensing in voiceless stops is somewhat less than in voiced stops (although it is the same in the 20-40 group). However, it is in both voiced and voiceless stops that the significant raising occurs. Most of the raising takes place in the under 40 groups; and this raising is another dimension on which the speakers do not match the Philadelphia pattern.

For the voiced fricatives and the voiceless palatal fricative the age effect is clear: the older speakers have the least tensing. In fact, the 40-60 year olds have no tensing at all in those groups.

Figure 3: Percentage tense in normally lax environments (excluding _d)

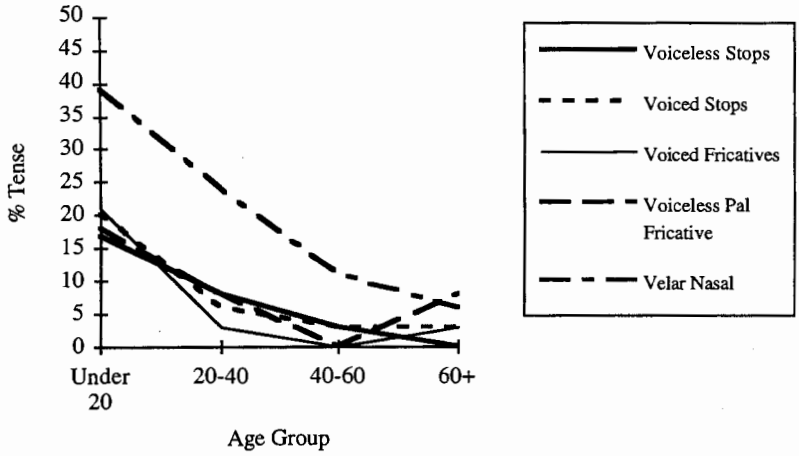


Figure 4 (Percentage Lax in Selected Environments) is scaled to 100%. At the highest point on the graph, is /l/ which is consistently lax among African-Americans. This is an environment for which Labov (1989: 28) reported "an exceptionally clear pattern in apparent time" for White Philadelphians. There is no such pattern among these Blacks. Out of 360 tokens, 350 were lax.

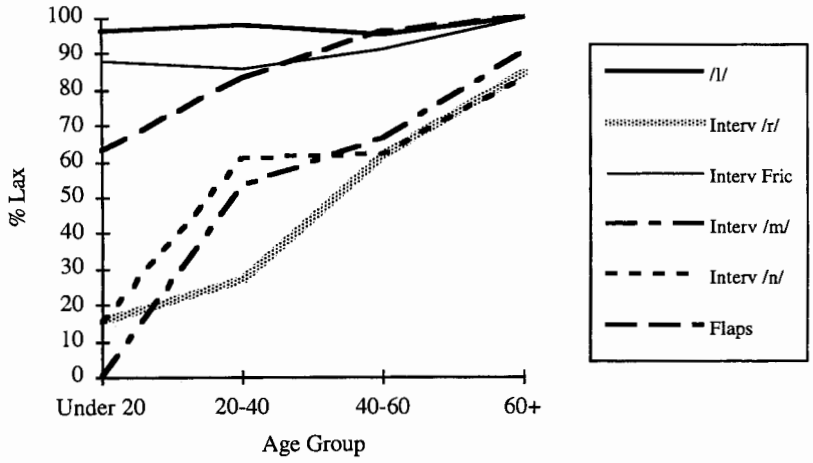
Intervocalic fricatives (e.g. in *classical, Kathy, Catholic*) do not show a significant difference between the youngest and oldest speakers (88% lax versus 100% lax). There were only 7 tokens for the youngest speakers. In contrast to the differences found with /l/, White Philadelphians have 100% lax short a when followed by an intervocalic fricative (Labov 1989: 30).

In the other environments, age appears to be a strong factor in the amount of tensing. For flaps, there is increased tensing in younger speakers which is consistent with

their pattern for voiced and voiceless stops. Intervocalic /m/ (*hammer*) and intervocalic /n/ (*banana*) show a strikingly consistent pattern across age groups. In each age group these two environments show similar patterns in laxing. For example, in the under 20 group intervocalic /m/ has 0% laxing while intervocalic /n/ has 15% laxing. For 60+ speakers, intervocalic /m/ has 90% laxing while intervocalic /n/ has 83% laxing. Payne (1980) found lexical diffusion among the intervocalic nasals in her study of suburban Philadelphia. One of the problems in this data is that there were very few words in the intervocalic /m/ group. For the under 20 group only *hammer*, *family*, and *glamorous* occur, so no conclusions may be drawn. However, for the intervocalic /n/ group, in the 40-60 age group, the words *planet* and *flannel* are tensed considerably more than the words *bananas* and *manage*. There are no tense occurrences in *manage* and only 11% in *bananas* versus 50% tensing in *flannel* and 56% in *planet*.

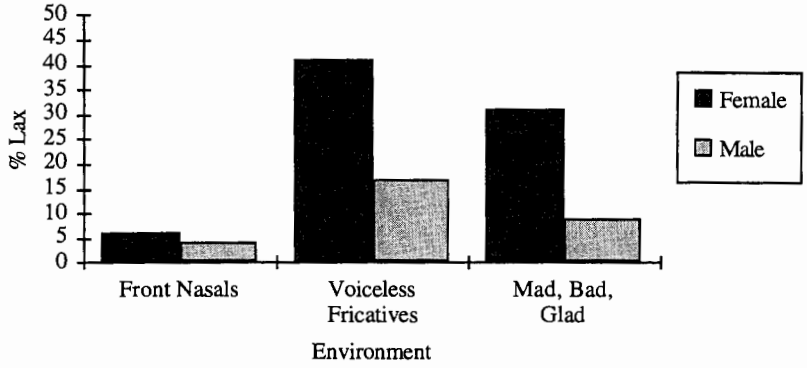
In intervocalic /r/ there is again a difference among the age groups. Younger speakers tense more (only 16% lax) and older speakers less (85% lax).

Figure 4: Percentage lax variants in selected environments



There are also consistent differences between females and males. In Figure 5, females and males are compared in the normally tense categories. As noted before, the front nasals is the category which is consistently tense for all speakers. However, in the other two groups, women depart the most from the Philadelphia pattern. They are laxing in normally tense words about twice the rate of men.

Figure 5: Percentage lax variants in normally tense environments by speaker sex



In Figure 6, which compares males and females in the core group of lax environments, the percentage raising is included in the percentage tensing. This is the group in which raising has the most effect; without including the percentage raising, it appears that the men more closely match the Philadelphia pattern in this core group. This is not the case precisely because of the raising. Women are raising far less than men. Figure 6 demonstrates that they are tensing quite a bit in the normally lax words.

In Figure 7 (Percentage Laxing in Selected Environments) men and women are fairly consistent in their behavior except for intervocalic /m/. Figure 7 is scaled to 100%.

Figure 6: Percentage tense variants in normally lax environments by speaker sex

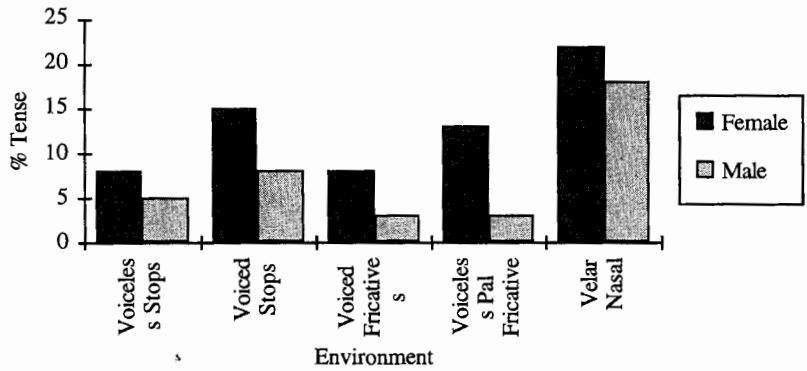
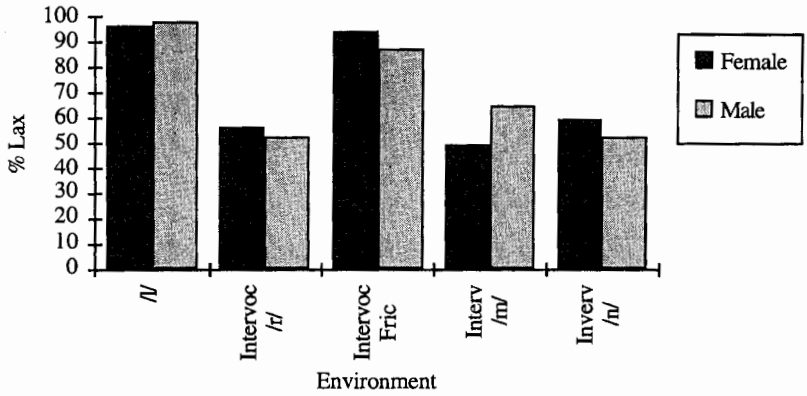


Figure 7: Percentage Lax in Selected Environments (By Sex)



Overall, the percentage of raising among these Blacks is small. There were 266 raised occurrences which represent 4% of the total tokens. Of the raised tokens, 76% are produced by males, and Figure 8 shows the effect across age groups. Raising represents 17% of the tokens in the under 20 group, 2% in the 20-40, 1% in 40-60, and 0% in the 60+ speakers. In this regard, these African-Americans are atypical of other Black Philadelphians who seem to consistently raise short a, especially before stops. In this data, this is exactly where most raising occurred. Of the 266 raised tokens, 207 (78%) occur before stops – 146 before voiceless stops alone.

Figures 8, 9, and 10 show a comparison of the African-Americans in this study to the White Philadelphians in Labov (1989) using percentages from casual speech. Figure 8 (over) compares Whites and Blacks in normally tense environments. There is general agreement on the front nasals, but the Blacks are laxing at much higher rates in the other two categories.

Figure 9 (over) shows similar differences. While Whites are hardly tensing at all, these Blacks are tensing at much higher frequencies. Figure 9 does not include raising which means that the pattern for African-Americans is even more different from Whites than this graph shows.

Figure 10 shows the selected groups discussed before. There is some similarity for /l/, but even that is a source of divergence for these two groups since Labov (1989) identified a change in progress with /l/ for Whites. No such change is evidenced in the data for Blacks.

Figure 8: Percentage lax variants in normally tense environments by speaker race (casual style)

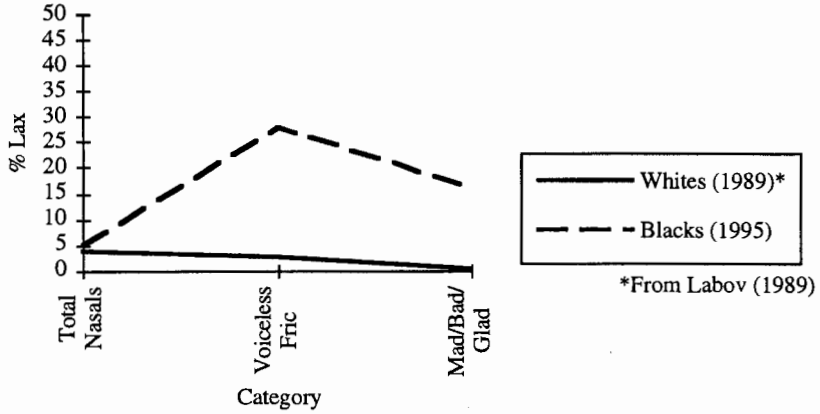


Figure 9: Percentage tense variants in normally lax environments by speaker race (casual style)

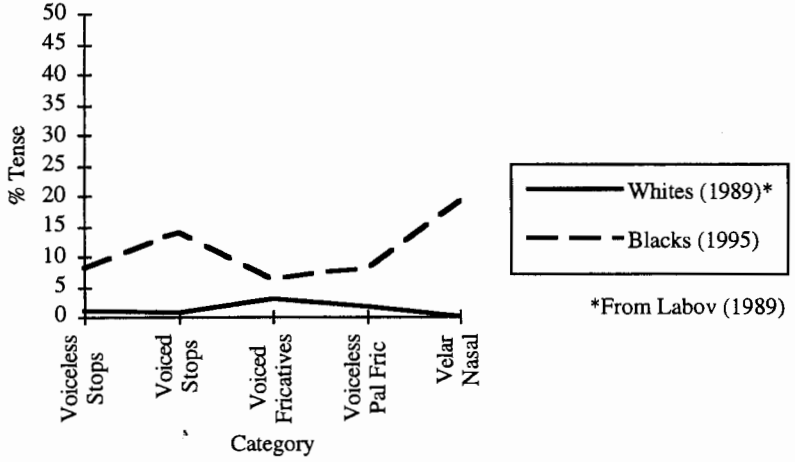
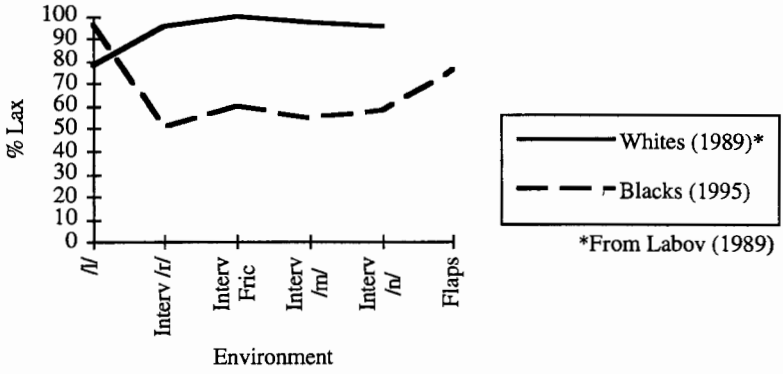


Figure 10: Percentage lax variants in selected groups by speaker race (casual style)

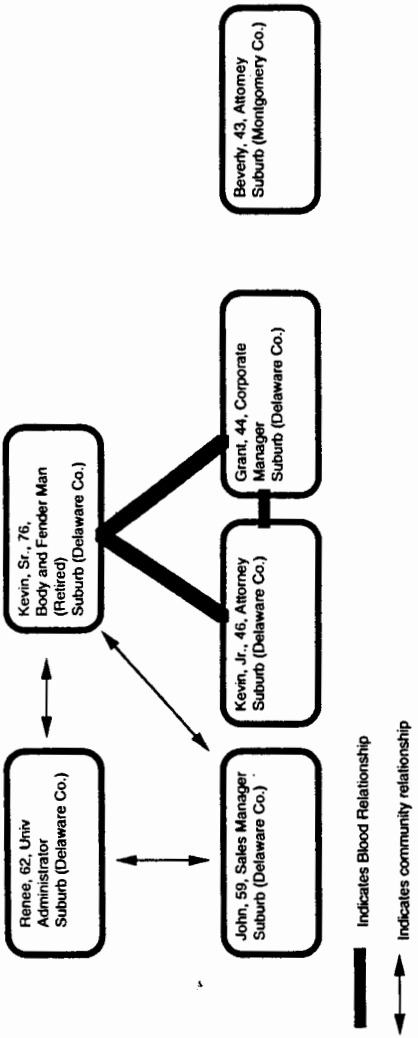


In spite of the overall differences between the Whites and Blacks, some speakers did match the pattern. There are several speakers who solidly demonstrate the pattern and about 10 who are fairly close. Generally, males over 40 who were raised in the suburbs show a greater similarity to the short a pattern of White Philadelphians. However, 2 females, as well as 4 men, demonstrate the Philadelphia pattern most solidly. Figure 11 on the next page gives a schematic representation to show how these speakers relate to each other.

One female is Beverly, a 43 year-old attorney who grew up in Montgomery County in a working class family.[3] She was the only African-American in her high school graduating class of 165; and she is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and Duke University Law School. The other female is Renee, a 62 year-old university administrator with a doctorate. She grew up in the same Delaware County suburb with two of the other speakers. Kevin Sr., 76, a retired body and fender man, and John, 59, a sales manager for a bakery. In fact, all three went to the same public schools. Their hometown was populated by many upwardly mobile Blacks during their childhoods, and although predominantly White, African-Americans made up about 25-30% of the school population. Renee's parents were both college graduates. Kevin, Sr. and John did not attend college, nor did their parents. All of these speakers except Kevin, Sr. are second generation Philadelphians. Kevin Sr.'s parents were North Carolinians. Labov (1989: 5) notes that "only children of Philadelphia-born parents show a consistent short a pattern." Of course, this is not intended as a categorical statement; and it is interesting to note that while Kevin did show the Philadelphia pattern, his two sisters (also in the 60+ group) did not show the pattern. Finally, the last two speakers, Kevin, Jr., 46, an attorney, and Grant, 44, a college graduate and manager for an aircraft manufacturer, are the sons of Kevin, Sr.

[3]Very generally, Montgomery County includes the northern and western suburbs of Philadelphia. Delaware County includes the southern and western suburbs.

Figure 11: Network diagram of speakers with short a pattern most like White Philadelphians



No one under 40 showed a solid Philadelphia short a pattern which may indicate that Blacks are shifting away from the pattern of Whites. Labov and Harris (1986: 20) note that "[t]he Philadelphia speech community is separating into two distinct speech communities: White and Black" which is understandable given the segregation of the North Philadelphia community which they studied. Wolfram and Hazen (this volume) describe the different phonological patterns maintained by one elderly Black woman in Okracoke, North Carolina – the sole survivor of the one Black family that has lived there for the past 100 years. In that case, however, there are considerable differences in social status and education. In contrast, the people in this study are ostensibly integrated into the White community: they grew up and live in predominantly White neighborhoods; they attend(ed) predominantly White schools; by their own admissions they have White friends and socialize with Whites; they work with Whites. Yet, they do not show one of the most uniform patterns that defines the Philadelphia community.

It seems that the physical integration of these African-Americans is deceiving. In interview after interview, these speakers detail the social and psychological isolation which defines the middle-class African-American experience. Through their experiences, they understand that they are viewed not only as different, but inferior. In the excerpts which follow, the speakers relate stories which prevent them from being full participants in mainstream society. It is important to realize that the excerpts which follow are not deviant or exceptional in any way. Nor are these events infrequent. African-Americans, especially those who live and work in integrated environments, have countless experiences like the following.

Dorothy, 81: graduated from West Chester State College in 1936 with a B.S. in Music Education, about one of her voice teachers and how it affected her performance. "[She] was noticeably a bigot...and I didn't like her. I felt uncomfortable around her always. And I always blundered in front of her. I was trying out [for the honored voice soloist]. She was there...So I came to make that high A flat. If I looked at her, I could not make it. I killed it every time and she would say "she shouldn't have it..., she's terrible."

Wendy, 15: a private school student, on the kinds of problems she will encounter as a Black actress. "something where it makes me look degraded and incapable and incompetent...I'll probably encounter that as a Black person."

Brenda, 33: an engineer, on a car ride through a predominantly Black area. "I was in the car one time with some of my friends and ...we were going somewhere after work...everybody else was White...and I'm sitting in the back seat, ...and this girl says – ...she's driving – 'Nigger get out the street.' And everything got quiet."

Ed, 25: law student, on a friend in college. "I thought [he] was a friend of mine. [He] walks into my room...he didn't know I was home. And he walks into my room and he says, 'Hey, is the nigger home?' In my room."

Herbert, 17: entering freshman at Duke University and son of physicians, on what other students said at a select private school in Philadelphia. "When we were in 10th grade...a lot of the students felt that a qualified White person's spot in college was being taken by a Black person who was not as qualified."

Thomas, 73: retired construction foreman, on his WWII experiences in France. "That's one thing they [the French] used to ask us. 'They [White Americans] don't even call you an American, they call you a Negro. Why do you fight for them? They don't even call you an American.' That was when I first heard being a Black American."

William, 73: a Tuskeegee airman, about his experiences in the armed forces. "Even in some of the theaters [on the air base] you had to go up in the peanut gallery. And German and Italian prisoners were allowed to move anywhere they wanted."

Many of the stories were indictments of the educational system.

Renee, 62: university administrator with a doctorate. "I had a very bitter experience when I was a senior [in high school]. I was going to graduate first in my class...they had never had a Black person who graduated [first]...they gave the commercial [non-college prep] section an extra credit for a class...I had all As...another girl in the commercial section ...had mostly As...she graduated 3/100 of a credit ahead of me. They deliberately [did it]..just to beat me out by 3/100 of a credit. I was devastated."

Theodore, 32: an attorney, on what a teacher said to him at Central High, Philadelphia's premier public high school. "[He] told us we'd be nothing more than two niggers on the corner drinking liquor."

And Theodore talks about an incident with a client 1995. "[He said] 'Why didn't you tell me you were Black? I think you misled me. I want you to find me a White male lawyer to handle this case.' I cried like a baby. I went home and literally went through a liter of vodka."

Kevin, Jr., 46: an attorney and graduate of the University of Pennsylvania Law School on a teacher in high school. "I told them [I wanted to go to] Penn State and [he] said that I'd only be allowed to rake the leaves and cut the grass there."

And Kevin, Jr. relates how he felt in light of the treatment he received from a guidance counselor. "[She] looked at me in surprise when I said Penn State, Howard, and Lincoln. Said these were all excellent institutions and I just didn't have it. They simply didn't care...I was, in effect, invisible."

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